

Message Text

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SUBJECT: RASP WILLIAM GADDIS

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TALKING POINTS FOR GADDIS FOLLOWS:

I. ONE AMERICAN WRITER

I HAVE GENERALLY TRIED AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE TO AVOID TALKING ABOUT MY WORK; AND APPEARING, IN EFFECT, IN PLACE OF IT. I THINK THIS IS BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE REASON A WRITER WRITES IS TO CONCENTRATE HIS IDEAS IN HIS WORK, AND IF HE FAILS TO DO SO - IF, IN OTHER WORDS, THE WRITING ITSELF FAILS TO CARRY HIS VISION WHERE HE CANNOT FOLLOW IT - NO AMOUNT OF WHAT HIS WRITING 'MEANS', OR WHAT HE 'TRIED TO DO' EXPLAINED BY HIM IS GOING TO CHANGE IT OR HELP IT. SO FAR AS I AM CONCERNED, THE WRITER - THAT IS TO SAY, THE ARTIST - IS WHAT IS LEFT OVER WHEN HIS WORK IS DONE.

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AS AN AMERICAN WRITER I BELIEVE I AM REPRESENTATIVE SIMPLY

BY BEING UNREPRESENTATIVE. WRITING IN AMERICA TAKES A GREAT DISPARITY OF FORMS AND OFFERS A GREAT DISPARITY OF REWARDS. (HERE I WOULD DISCUSS THE RANGE OF WAYS OPEN TO A WRITER TO

MAKE A LIVING, FROM COMMERCIAL WORK SUCH AS TELEVISION, JOURNALISM, CORPORATE WORK, TO TEACHING, COMPARING WRITING AS A CRAFT TO WRITING AS AN ART.)

NEXT, WRITING AND THE ARTS REGARDED SIMPLY AS ENTERTAINMENT AS A DECORATION TO SOCIETY, AS OPPOSED TO A SERIOUS FIXTURE IN IT. IN AMERICA I THINK THIS HAS BEEN CHANGING FROM THE FORMER TO THE LATTER. FOR THE WRITER IT HAS RAISED THE QUESTION OF WHY HE WRITES; AND, IN A SOCIETY BASED ON PRODUCTION AND USEFUL WORK, WHETHER HE IS A PRODUCTIVE MEMBER OF SOCIETY.

WHETHER CONSCIOUSLY OR NOT, THE WRITER HAS CHOSEN TO PLACE HIMSELF OUTSIDE HIS SOCIETY WHICH CREATES THE CONSTANT TENSION THAT PRODUCES HIS WORK. IN AMERICA THIS TENSION MAY BECOME EXTREME SINCE HE IS GIVEN ABSOLUTE FREEDOM. THIS, THEN, MUST INCLUDE THE FREEDOM TO FAIL IN SOCIETY'S TERMS OF SUCCESS, AND THIS IS BOTH THE DESPAIR AND LUXURY OF THE POSITION HE HAS CHOSEN, THE PRICE HE PAYS FOR THE FREEDOM TO WRITE AS HE WISHES; THE ESSENTIAL CHOICE BETWEEN BEING ALLOWED TO FAIL AT SOMETHING WORTH DOING, AND SUCCEEDING AT SOMETHING WHICH IS NOT.

FINALLY, I THINK THE VERY TERMS OF MY BEING HERE EMPHASIZE AMERICA'S PLACE FOR THE WRITER FROM OUR SOCIETY'S POINT OF VIEW. MY LAST PUBLISHED NOVEL WAS WIDELY REVIEWED AS A SATIRE OF OUR ECONOMIC SYSTEM, YET IT WAS WRITTEN WITH HELP FROM A GRANT BY OUR NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS, AND I AM HERE NOW FREE TO SAY WHAT I WISH LARGELY THROUGH MY GOVERNMENT'S AUSPICES. THIS ABILITY TO AFFORD DISSENT, EVEN ENCOURAGE IT, I THINK SPEAKS A GREAT DEAL FOR THE VITALITY AND STRENGTH OF AS MANY-SIDES A COUNTRY AS MINE.

II. A NATION'S FICTION AS ITS CONSCIENCE

FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS SUBJECT I AM NOT AS FAMILIAR AS
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I SHOULD BE WITH THE FICTION OF OTHER COUNTRIES THAN MY OWN - AND EVEN THIS I AM NOT THAT FAMILIAR WITH. BUT I THINK THIS MAY REPRESENT WHAT I THINK IS OUR PREOCCUPATION WITH OUR OWN COUNTRY, AND THE HISTORICAL PLACE OF ITS FICTION AS SELF-CRITICISM. AND I WONDER HOW UNIQUELY AMERICAN THIS IS.

THE OBVIOUS DANGER THIS CARRIES WITH IT IS TO ASCRIBE

FAULTS TO ONE'S OWN SOCIETY WHICH ARE, IN FACT, THE FAIL-
INGS OF SOCIETIES IN GENERAL - WHICH ARE IN FACT HUMAN
FAILINGS IN NATIONAL COSTUME. IT MIGHT BE SAID, FOR
EXAMPLE, THAT A COUNTRY IS DEFINED IN TERMS OF ITS IMAGE
OF SUCCESS AND OF FAILURE. THE AMERICAN IMAGE OF SUCCESS

IS SO COMPELLING THAT IT HAS SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE WORLD;
YET OUR FICTION IS OFTEN THE LITERATURE OF FAILURE. AGAIN,
I WONDER HOW UNIQUELY AMERICAN THIS IS.

FROM OUR BEGINNINGS WE HAVE BEEN FREE OF THE RESTRAINTS OF
A LONG HISTORY, ONE WHICH FOR INSTANCE IMPOSED A CLASS
SYSTEM ON OUR SOCIETY. FOR THE WRITER OF COURSE I BELIEVE
A CLASS SYSTEM MAKES HIS WORK EASIER, GIVES IT A FRAMEWORK
TO EXPLORE: WE HAVE NONE. AND IN TERMS OF FAILURE AND
SUCCESS, A GREAT FICTIONAL ADVANTAGE OF THE CLASS SYSTEM
IS THAT THE LEVELS OF ACHIEVEMENT ARE CLEARLY DRAWN, AND
THAT NO ONE CAN BE BLAMED FOR NOT ACCOMPLISHING WHAT WAS
NEVER EXPECTED OF HIM BY SOCIETY IN THE FIRST PLACE.

STILL ONE WAY OR ANOTHER THERE IS NO ESCAPING THIS PRE-
DICAMENT. WITH NO LONG HISTORY AND NO CLASS SYSTEM, WITH
THE TRADITION OF A COMPLETE FREEDOM TO DO AND BECOME WHAT
ONE WANTS TO, WE ARE CONFRONTED WITH ESSENTIAL HUMAN PRO-
BLEMS OF WHAT, EXACTLY, IS WORTH DOING. THIS SEEMS TO ME
THE CHALLENGE THAT AMERICAN FICTION HAS CENTERED UPON FROM
ITS BEGINNINGS.

AND IN FICTION, THIS TAKES THE SHAPE OF 'THE WAY THINGS
SHOULD BE' AS OPPOSED TO 'THE WAY THINGS ARE'. WE ARE STILL
I THINK INVOLVED IN UNRAVELLING WHAT WE ADOPTED AS A HISTORY
WITHOUT A PAST, A DERIVATION OF THE PROTESTANT ETHIC IN
WHICH A CALLING TO HONEST WORK PRODUCES GOOD INCOME; GOOD
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INCOME BECOMES THE GOAL; AND THE GOAL PRODUCES GOOD INCOME.
THIS IS WHAT I THINK PRODUCED OUR AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY OF
PRAGMATISM, IN WHICH EXPEDIENCY BECOMES THE GOAL IN TERMS,
TOO OFTEN, OF THE WAY 'THINGS ARE', RATHER THAN THE WAY
THINGS 'SHOULD BE'. AND THIS IN TURN IS THE CONFRONTATION
THAT MUCH OF OUR FICTION TRIES TO DESCRIBE AND REDRESS.

(HERE I WOULD GO INTO THE FUNCTION OF SATIRE AS AN EXPRES-
SION OF CONSCIENCE, AND THE FACT OF ITS ACCEPTANCE AS
INDICATION THAT WHAT IS AT STAKE IS NOT A SYSTEM, BUT
FAULTS IN A SYSTEM, WHICH CAN AND MUST BE RESOLVED.)
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